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The relevance of employability skills in the 21st-century: the overseas employers' perspective

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International Student Graduate Employability



Research context and gap

- International students accounting for one-fifth of the total student population (UKCISA, 2019), among whom, 23.2% were Chinese students.
- Research suggests UK higher education institutions have largely been UK-centric and there is a significant lack of focus on the employability needs of international students (Goodwin and Mbah 2019).
- There is a lack of communication between HEIs and Overseas employers which results in a mismatch between the skills promoted by HEIs and the demands of international employers (Huang and Turner, 2018).
- In particular, skills developed by host HEIs are more influenced by the standards of demands from local employers which do not align with the overseas labour markets (Cai, 2014).

Research aim and objectives

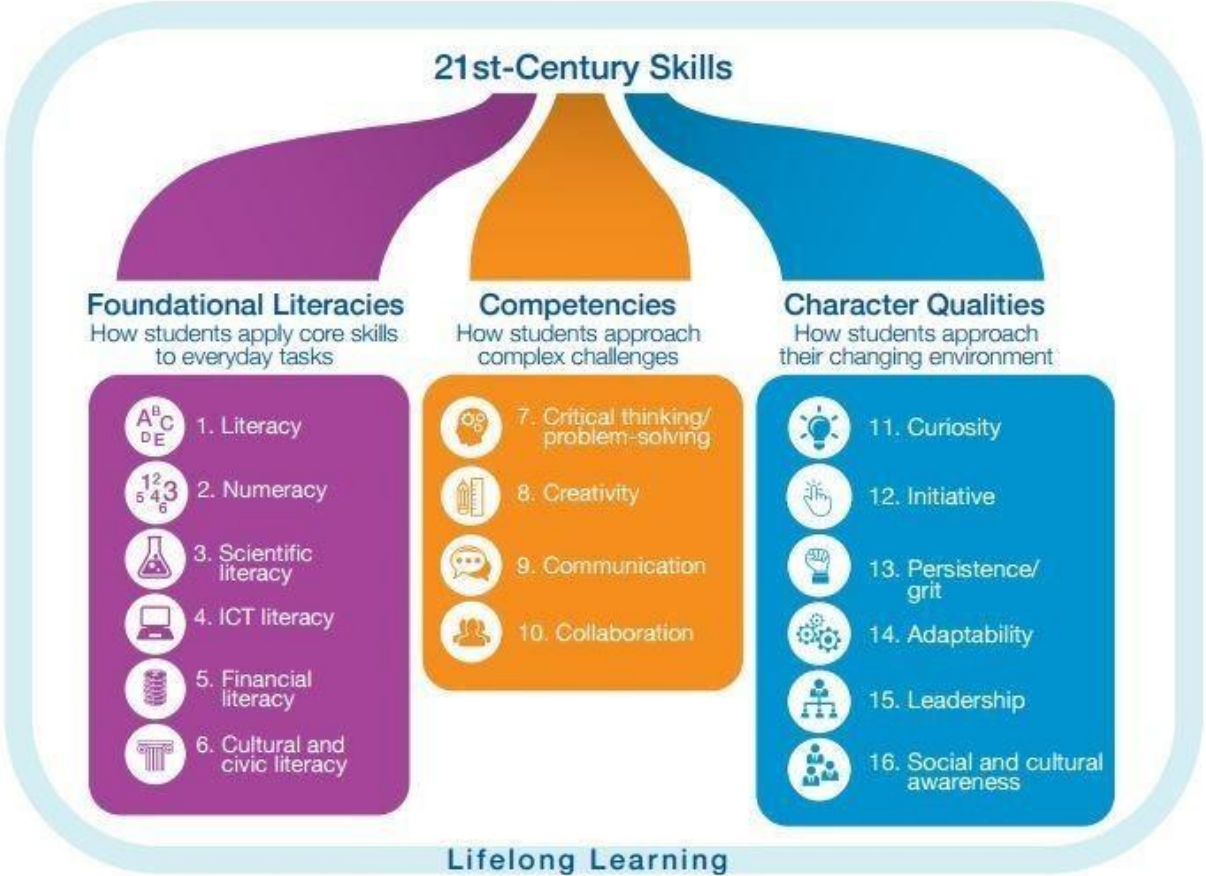
The project aims to explore the perspectives of Chinese international students (alumni and current students) and **Chinese employers** in the UK on Chinese student study abroad experience and employability skills development in the UK.

It has the following objectives:

1. To investigate the perspectives of Chinese employers, Chinese international students and teachers in the UK universities on student study abroad experience and employability skills
2. To compare different perspectives and identify the needs of Chinese international students regarding career-related information
3. To identify the frequently used platforms and channels by Chinese international students and the timescale of career planning
4. To provide recommendations for career services and academic department on how to better support international student employability development

What makes students employable?

Exhibit 1: Students require 16 skills for the 21st century



Note: ICT stands for information and communications technology.

Impact of study abroad on employability

European employers valuations on study abroad (van Mol, 2017)

1. Team working skills
2. Ability to adapt and act in new situations
3. Communication skills =
3. Computer skills =
5. Analytic and problem solving skills =
5. Good reading/writing skills =
7. Sector specific skills
8. Planning and organisational skills
9. Decision making skills
10. Good with numbers
11. Foreign language skills

British Council (2018)

Study of 350 Chinese employers views of students with study abroad - 86% employers agree it is of value - even though relative advantage of a degree has declined

Gap is greater in soft skills. Such skills where students with study abroad are perceived to be better:

- Creativity
- Communication and presentation skills
- Analytic skills
- Teamwork

Less good: Organisational skills, networks in China

Less good: Easy to manage, loyalty, salary expectations

Hard skills

- IT skills
- Numeric skills
- Digital marketing skills
- Graphic design

Less good: accounting and legal skills

Skills in our survey



Your view of employability skills

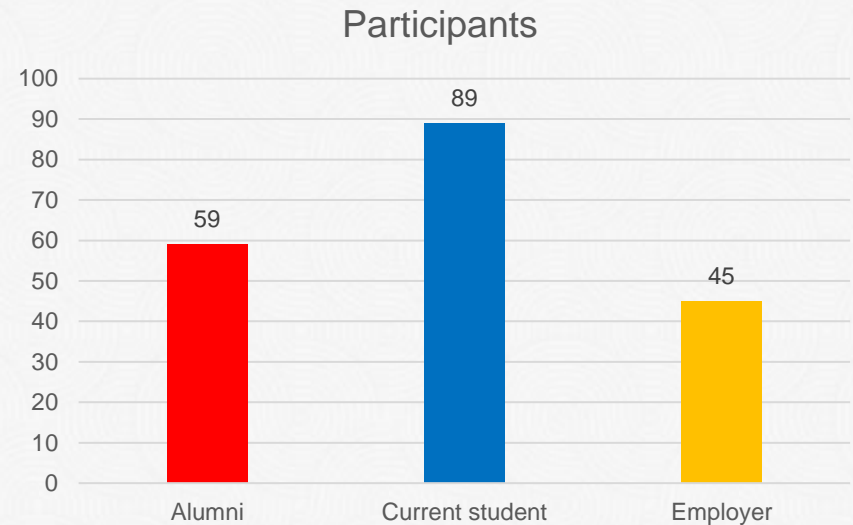
*Which of these skills/attitudes do you think would contribute to Chinese students' future employability?

	Not important	Desirable	Essential
Good with numbers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Good reading/writing skills in Chinese	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Foreign (English) language skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Computer skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Subject specific skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ability to create a wide set of personal and family friends and contacts who can be drawn on for work purposes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Good at networking within the profession	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Knowledge of local market in China	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A wide set of local contacts in China	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Knowledge of overseas markets, eg UK	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work experience	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Negotiation/ persuasion	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Assertiveness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Customer service	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Presentation skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Survey Data (Sample Composition)

Online survey distributed to Chinese employers, alumni, current students,

- Questionnaire (Mandarin) to Chinese employers, alumni, current students
- 380 questionnaire were collected with 193 valid responses.
- Focus: data from Chinese employers (n=45)

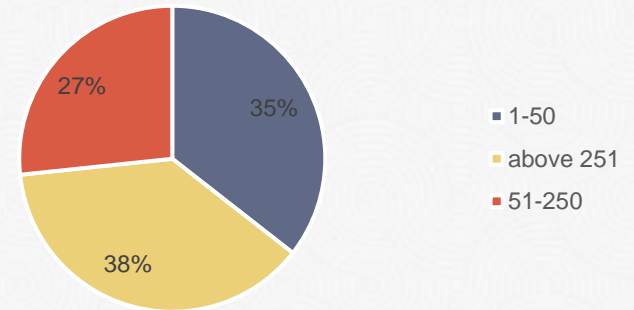


Survey Data (Sample Composition)

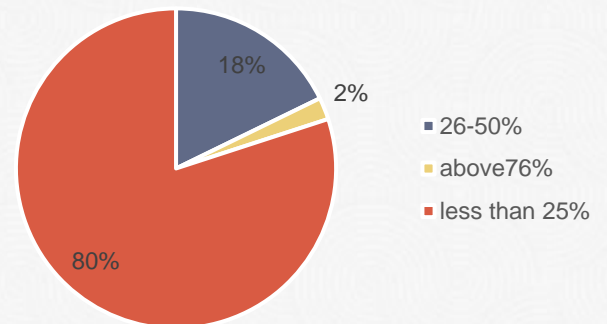
Employers (n=45)

- Employers in our survey consist of evenly distributed SME and large companies.
- Majority of the employers have less than 25% of their employees with study abroad experience.

Company size

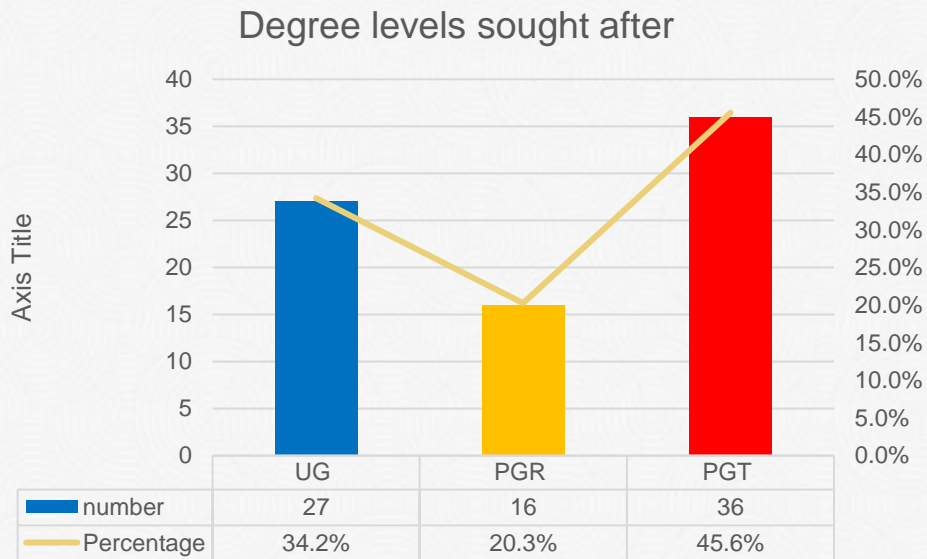


Percentage of employees with study abroad experience



Survey Data

Overseas PGT degree is the most sought after degree level by employers, followed by UG degree, PGR degree is comparatively in less demand.



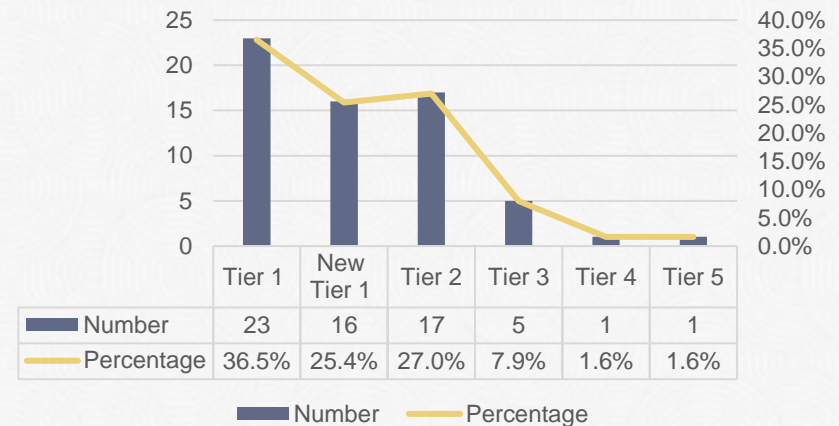
Survey Data

China has a hierarchical classification of cities (tier city system): Tier1 (e.g. Shanghai, Beijing), New Tier1 and Tier 2 (e.g. provincial capital cities), Tier 3-5.

In order to settle in the top tier cities (if not their residences), people need to gain a resident permit (Hukou).

- Most positions offered by employers in this survey are in Tier 1 cities, New Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities.
- Many of these positions come with benefits, such as sponsoring resident permit applications.
- This suggests that study abroad experiences could help international Chinese students to migrate from lower tier cities to top tier cities.

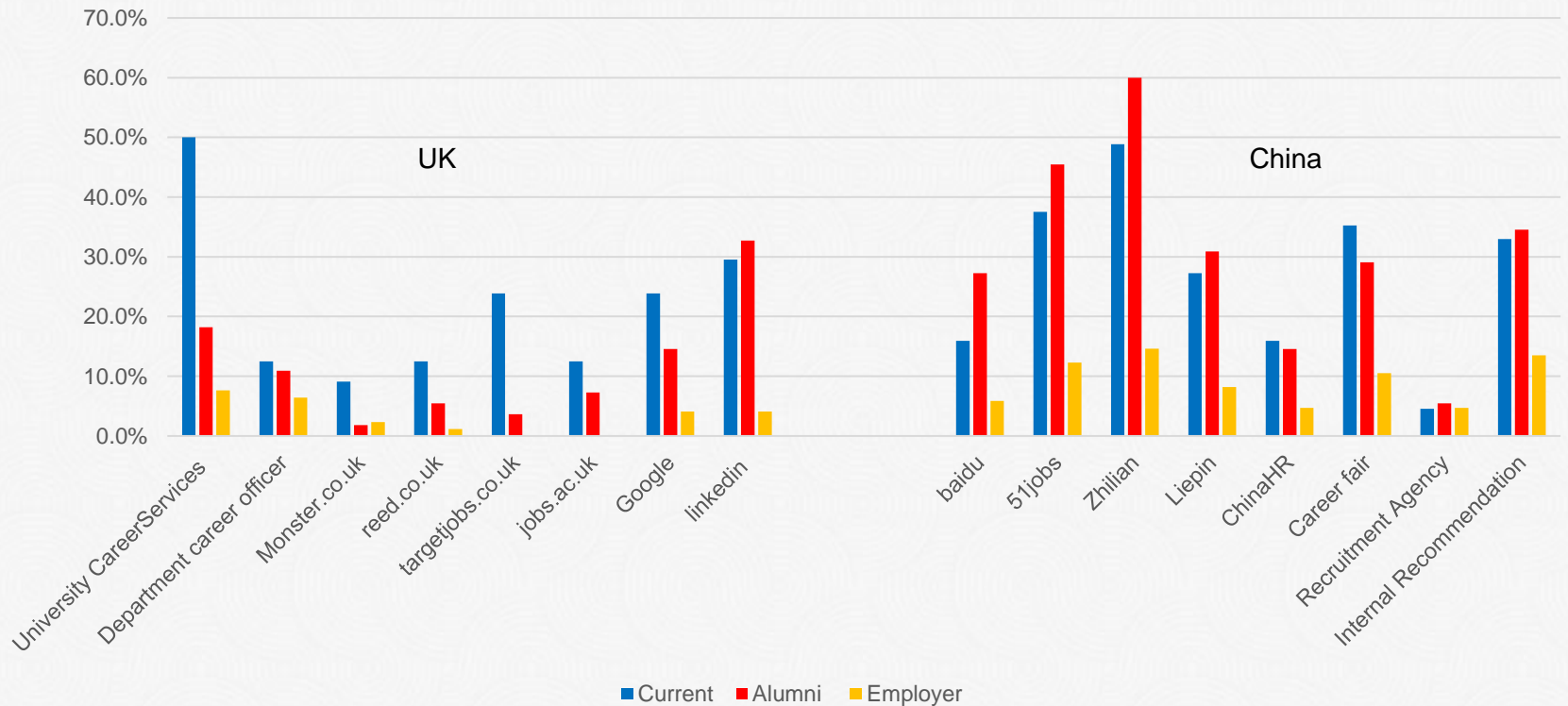
Position offered by employers according to city types



Survey Data

Employers seldom use career websites in the UK, although some employers would contact UK university career services and career officers of academic departments of relevant disciplines.

Information Channels



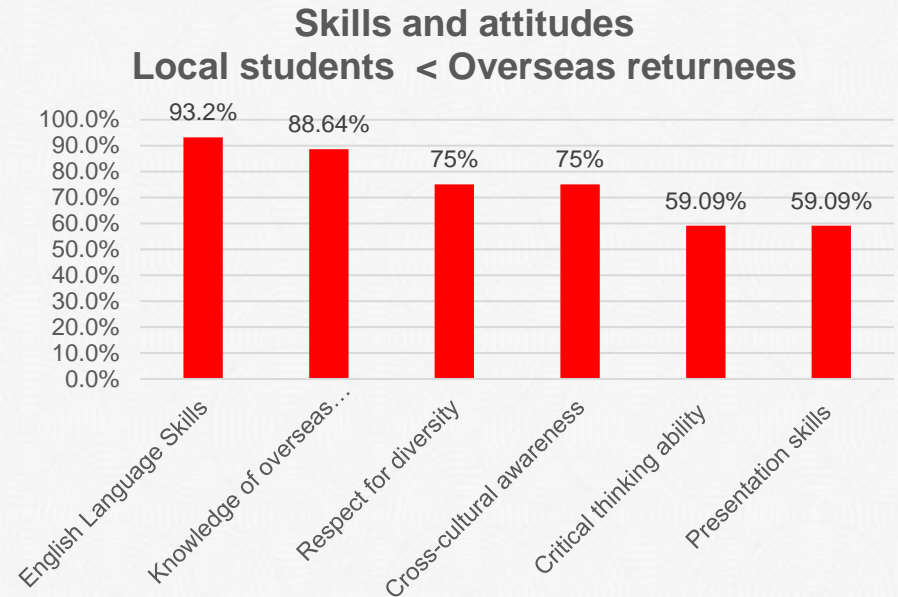
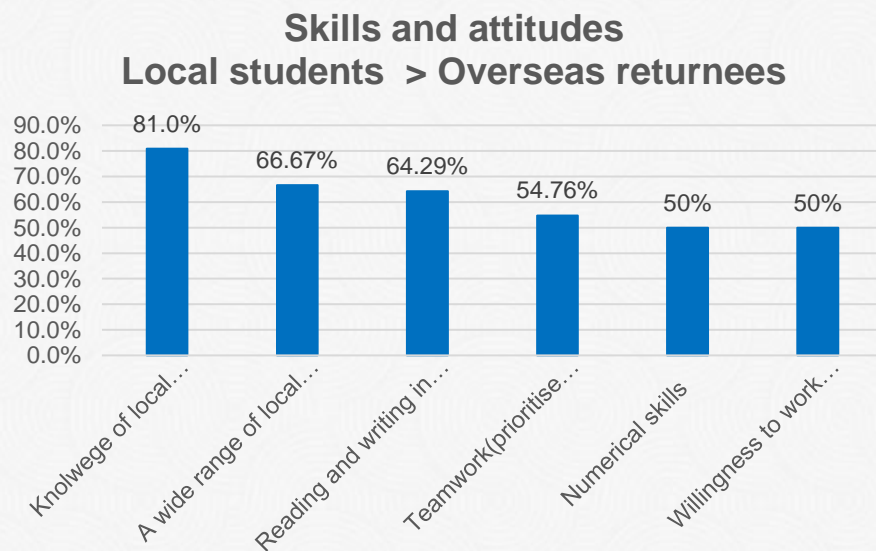
Survey Data

Employers consider that students with study abroad experiences have advantages over local Chinese students in the following areas:

- English Language Skills, Knowledge of overseas markets, respect for diversity, cross-cultural awareness, critical thinking ability, and presentational skills.

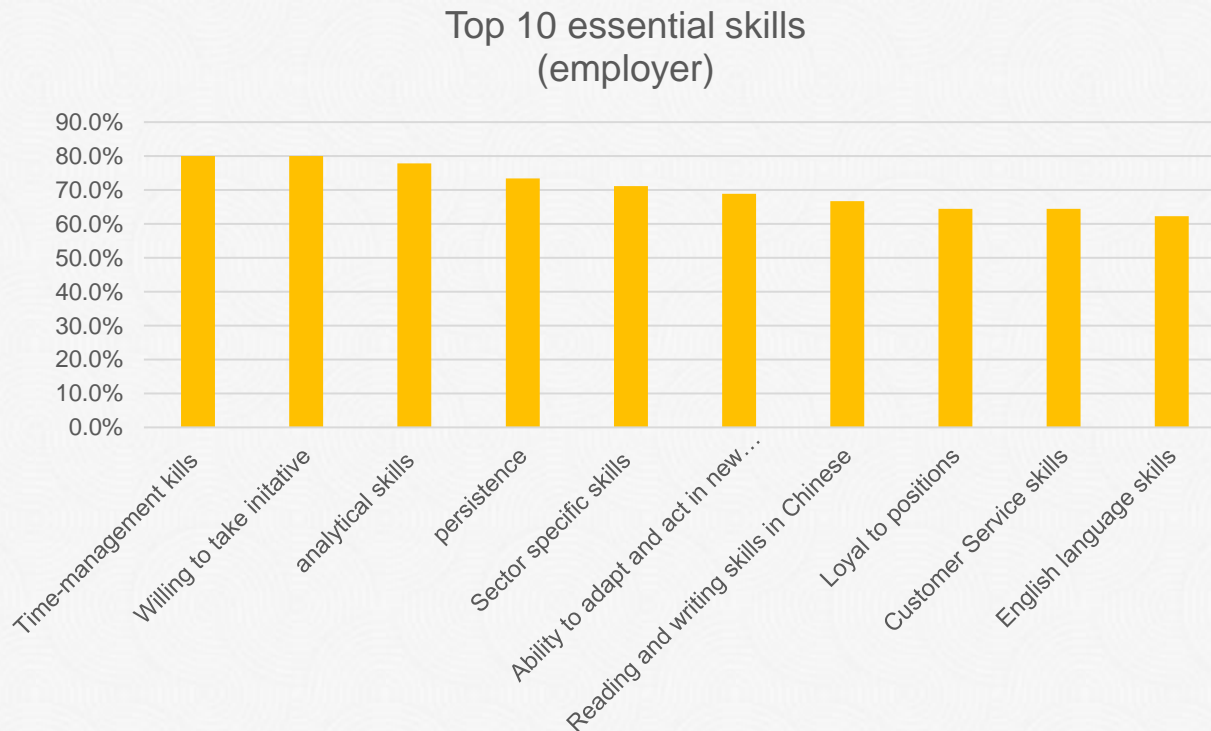
Employers consider that local students have advantages over students with study abroad experiences in the following areas:

- Knowledge of local markets in China, local contacts/networks, reading/writing skills in Chinese, Team spirits (prioritize group interests over individual interests), numerical skills, and wiliness to work outside 9-5.



Survey Data

- Top 10 essential skills reported by employers can be seen in the graph below.
- Reading/writing skills in Mandarin and Loyalty to positions is considered more important than English Language skills.



Perception of employers from working with overseas returnees

- **Individualistic and independent compared to local students**

“Too individualistic, lack team spirit, less flexible about working outside working hours.”

“They are more independent and positive with good spoken English. They have advantages over local peers when it comes to translation tasks. However, they do not agree with working outside normal hours and prefer to have a clear boundary between work and life.”

- **Lack of awareness of local markets**

“Increasingly there are more overseas returnees in Tier 1 cities. These returnees are good at self-discovery and development. They are more open minded and have good time management skills and critical thinking abilities. However, in terms of sector specific knowledge, they are the same with local students. But local students have good knowledge of local markets through lots of internship opportunities during study.”

- **Good life skills**

“Overseas returnees have strong life skills, such as cooking, cleaning, and healthy life styles”

Summary

- Study abroad helps students migrate to top tier cities
- Chinese career sites are the main channels for finding openings; Guanxi is not the main route to gaining employment
- Employer perspectives of the main benefits/ disadvantages of study

Benefits: Adaptability, English language skills, respect for diversity and multi-cultural working are the main gains from study in UK

Disadvantages: Whereas knowledge of local markets/ networks, willingness to work outside 9-5, numerical skills, reading/writing Chinese

Reflections

- For teachers
 - Should we build into our teaching material to make students aware of the various work practices outside UK eg the need to work beyond 9-5?
 - Do we have a problem teaching numerical skills?
 - What sort of support would improve the rating students give to employability support?
 - Can we do more to support Chinese students' desire for personal growth beyond employability?
- For careers advice
 - How aware are we of the different recruitment process and channels outside UK or Europe and the timing of recruitment processes?
 - How can we find out more about what employers want?

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Thank you for your attention!

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